

Arizona Republic

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WASHINGTON - The federal government should follow Arizona's lead in following the money to catch the ruthless human traffickers who smuggle illegal immigrants across the border, says a federal report released Thursday.

The report, by the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, says U.S. Immigration and Customs would do well to adopt the investigative tools used in Arizona to track the money wired to smugglers from immigrants' families.

By searching wire transfers for suspicious activity involving large sums of money flowing into Arizona from Mexico, Arizona Attorney General Terry Goddard's office was able to track the payoffs to drophouses where smugglers stashed illegal immigrants until they received payment.

From 2004 to 2006, Arizona seized about \$20 million in cartel assets, arrested hundreds of smugglers and shut down 22 businesses that laundered the smugglers' money.

Arizona's techniques could be used by federal authorities to track smugglers throughout the Southwest border region, according to the report.

"Arizona mined data to identify patterns and connect dots," said Richard Stana, director of homeland security issues for the GAO. "That kind of strategy, we think, is really important."

Stana said it also would help federal authorities break up smuggling cartels if they had the power to seize the drop houses the way they can now seize other assets used in criminal enterprises.

Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., introduced a bipartisan bill this week that would allow federal authorities to seize drop houses.

"They're magnets for violent crime, and they threaten the safety of our community," Mitchell said.

Federal efforts to secure the Southwest border have failed to focus enough attention on catching smugglers, Goddard told a key House panel Thursday.

Goddard, testifying before the House Homeland Security Committee, urged Congress to provide at least \$50 million to double the current funding of the four-state Southwest Border Anti-Money Laundering Alliance. The alliance, made up of Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas, aims to disrupt the Mexican crime cartels that smuggle drugs across the border and have also seized control of the human-trafficking industry.

"Perhaps the biggest failure of our national debate on border security is that the cartel threat seems to have taken a back seat to discussions about immigration," Goddard testified. "Yet, if we eliminate the cartel organizations, the ability of large numbers to illegally cross our Southwest border would be dramatically reduced. Very few illegal border crossers would make the trip across the harsh Sonoran Desert without the smuggling cartels who transport them."

Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer sent a statement to the hearing saying that her state is paying a high cost for the federal government's failure to stop the smugglers.

"The consequences of human smuggling are widespread and impact every single taxpayer," Brewer said. "Naturally, human smuggling leads to illegal immigration, but it also leads to illegal-alien deaths, crime and violence, an increased financial burden on taxpayers, environmental damage and degradation, and poses a national security threat to the United

States as the Southern border is an open invitation to terrorists."

James Dinkins, executive associate director of homeland security investigations for ICE, said his agency has been working with other law-enforcement authorities to crack down on human smuggling through the Border Enforcement Security Task Forces in Phoenix and 16 other cities.

"From October 2008 through June 2010, the (task forces) have initiated 396 human-smuggling investigations nationwide resulting in 582 criminal arrests, 291 indictments, and 361 convictions," Dinkins said.